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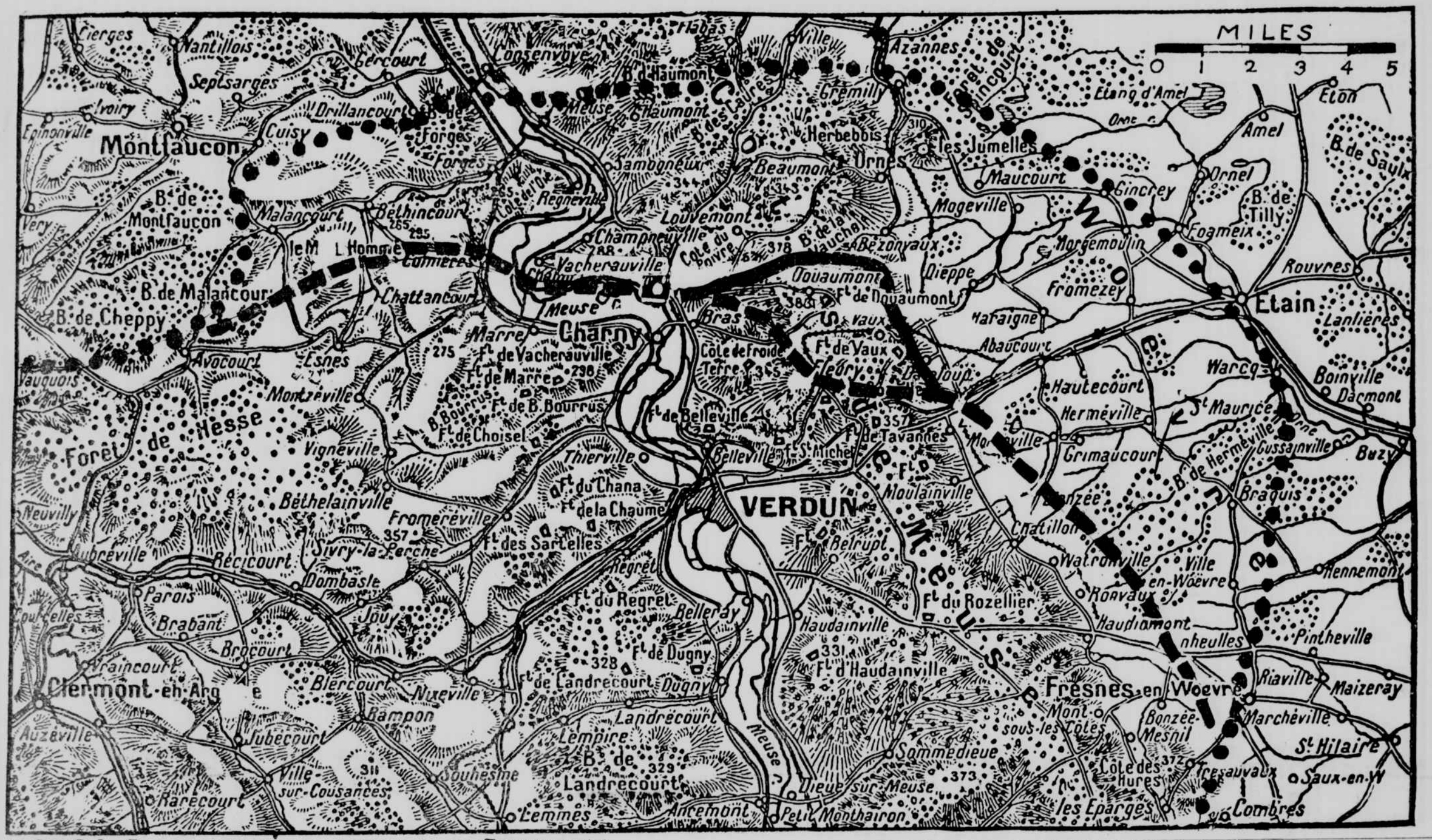
VERDUN, THE THIRD AND GREATEST GERMAN FAILURE



BEFORE GERMAN ATTACK IN FEBRUARY.
LIMIT OF GERMAN ADVANCE REACHED JUNE 25.
ENCLOSES GROUND RETAKEN BY FRENCH RECENTLY.

By FRANK H. SIMONDS,
Author of "The Great War," "They Shall Not Pass."

Three times in the present war German High Command has matched itself with French; three times, in conflicts on which the issue of the war hung, the genius of two races has come into collision. The results of these three conflicts will remain forever comprehended in three names, Paris, Calais, Verdun, and if the salvation of Paris through the Battle of the Marne was the greatest of the three victories, more important to our civilization than anything that has happened in modern history, the French defence of Verdun will take its place close beside the earlier conflict.

And at Verdun as at the Marne every physical circumstance was against the French; they were outnumbered, they were outgunned, they were fighting with their backs to the wall; to retreat meant not alone defeat, but disaster. Joffre's memorable words on September 5, 1914, which bade those soldiers who could not advance to die in their tracks, were but repeated by the phrase of the French soldiers themselves at Verdun, whose "They shall not pass" caught the echo and the spirit of the Spartans of Thermopylæ.

In the Past Tense .

To-day, when the French troops have at last taken the offensive and in a few hours regained all but one of the important positions lost by them in the defensive phase of the Verdun campaign, it is possible to speak of Verdun in the past tense. It is finished, and all that we may now look forward to is the relatively insignificant push over the ruins of Fort Vaux, the last foothold that the Germans retain in the outer circle of the old defences of the Meuse citadel. When Vaux has been taken then the Verdun episode will be as completely history as the rush to Paris or the advance to Calais.

(Vaux was evacuated by the Germans on November 1.)

After eight months the story of the German attack upon Verdun is at last fairly well known to the world. It was a supreme effort to dispose of France. It was conceived by Falkenhayn, chief of the German Staff, for the purpose of completing the work that was begun in the opening days of the war, interrupted by the defeat of the Marne, postponed by the repulse at the Yser and the city of Ypres. It was a deliberate determination to crush France by the greatest concentration of guns ever seen on any battlefield and by a thrust backed by the best trained soldiers that Germany commanded.

Less than a year before Germany had struck exactly the same blow at Russia along the Dunajec, and it had resulted in that disaster to the Slavs which at a single thrust undid months of Russian success and carried the victorious Germans beyond Warsaw and Brest-Litovsk, far into the provinces of Old Russia.

The Verdun Plan

In January, 1916, Germany could say to herself that Russia was out of the war for several months—for six months, at least. The Germans reckoned quite correctly. They could also see that England would not be ready within the same time. The Balkan campaign had abolished all danger from the south and put the Turk on his feet again. Even Austria was sufficiently reorganized to be able to undertake an offensive aimed at the Venetian Plain and destined to reach the very edge of the foothills that rise from the Adige and Brenta valleys.

In January, 1916, there was only France ready and in the field. If France could be crushed before the six months, during which Britain and Russia were unready and Italy occupied, Germany had the certainty of victory before her. All the conditions that favored her before the Marne were in her favor now, save only that the French were, conceivably, better prepared. This the Germans did not concede to themselves. Nor did they believe that there were left to France the men and the spirit to fight alone, with the awful consciousness that none of their allies was in condition to help or would be for many months to come.

Germany's Mistake

The great events of war are almost always dependent upon the estimate made by one of the contestants as to the condition of the other. Napoleon on the battlefield of Waterloo rejoiced because he at last had the British before him. He had ever underestimated them, and his underestimate was the true explanation of his defeat. The German underestimate of the spirit and the numbers of the French in January, 1916, led them to a disaster only less than Waterloo in immediate consequences.

We know now that there were voices in Germany, as there were voices in Napoleon's staff before Waterloo, which warned against this new trial in the West. We know that the grim old Hindenburg stormed at the abandonment of the eastern field, in which he had won so many victories. But the German General Staff, the German people, saw an exhausted France as they had seen a decadent France eighteen months earlier, and stood firm in their decision, which won the support of the Kaiser because it held out the promise that his son, commanding the victorious army, would establish the Hohenzollern fame on still surer ground.

When the struggle opened on February 21 the Germans had on a narrow front north of Verdun not less than 3,000 guns of every calibre. They had upward of 300,000 troops, many of which had been enjoying a long period of rest and preparation. They had before them less than 80,000 French troops, and these not of the best. Behind the French was no concentration of heavy artillery. The first line trenches were good, the second scarcely more than a trace, for the French had relied upon the old permanent forts as points of support. In every essential the German attack was a surprise, and its immediate effect was terrific.

The First Three Days

Even now we do not know exactly what happened in the next three days. The fragments of the French troops hung on to portions of their positions and died about them. The German wave did not come through with an immediate rush as at the Dunajec. There was some semblance of a front during these three terrible days, but there was no organized front, and the heroism of the regimental officers, who died with their men, chiefly postponed the immediate disaster.

But the postponement was brief. By February 25 the Germans had come south more than four miles, they had come clean through all the French lines of trenches, and what was worse, they had actually taken Fort Douaumont, which was the most important of the old permanent forts in the outer circle of the Verdun defences. From this fort they could look straight down into the burning city of Verdun and were not oversanguine when they forecast to the world its immediate fall. At this time, too, they claimed to have taken Vaux, a mistaken claim, for it was four months later that Vaux fell, although Vaux is less than a mile from Douaumont.

In this time we have terrible anxiety in Paris and grave division of opinion between the French army and the French statesmen. The army believes that the policy of wisdom is to fall back behind the flooded Meuse, not to attempt to restore a line on a hillside, with the river out of its banks and just behind, not to risk a great disaster and the loss of the whole army. In the view of the soldier Verdun is worthless, if the hills behind it can be held, and the soldier guarantees this. But the statesman sees more clearly. He recognizes that all France, all Germany, the whole world will read in the evacuation a confession of terrible defeat.

So at last we have the decision of the soldier to accept the will of the statesman, the personal victory of Briand over Joffre. Castelnau and Pétain go to Verdun—Castelnau, who saved Nancy in August and September, 1914, Pétain who all but pierced the German lines in Champagne in the great battle of September, 1915.

The Iron Corps Holds

What follows immediately is the most brilliant of all the phases of Verdun. A new line must be formed, new trenches and defences put in, and while this is done the Germans must be checked. For this there is, fortunately, available the best corps in France, the Corps of Iron, the corps which will live with the Old Guard in French history, Balfourier's Twentieth Corps. When the blow fell this corps was resting at Camp de Mailly, nearly a hundred miles south, and now it arrives in automobiles and throws itself into the furnace. In the next few days its mission is to hold while a new army creates a new line.

And the Twentieth does hold. It cannot get back Fort Douaumont, but it dies in the Ravine of Death, it retakes the village of Douaumont, it clings to the slopes of Pepper Hill, it clears the approaches to Vaux, but for the most part it stands and dies on the lines it takes up when it reaches the front. All through the last days of February the terrible struggle goes on. The losses on both sides are terrible, but the German losses begin to be unparalleled as their commanders feel the great moments slipping by. Actually this is the great crisis of Verdun; there will be no such critical hours again.

With the first days of March there is a pause, then on March 9 comes the second great convulsion; but the French are ready, the new army with Pétain has arrived and taken its position, the work of the Twentieth Corps is completed and the Germans are this time unable to emerge from the battered walls of Douaumont. Now they try the west bank of the river, and Dead Man's Hill and Hill 304 come into the official reports, to linger over many months. But here the German advance is slow and insignificant. They had got south four miles in four days east of the river; they never got three miles south on the west.

A Siege Begun

After March 9 the French High Command is no longer troubled. It is satisfied that Verdun will hold. It recognizes the remote possibility of further retirements, but the chance of a break in the whole line, and there was a very real chance in the first days, has disappeared. Germany will now have to buy each inch of French soil at a French price. All chance of a great success has gone, only a fight for moral values remains, but the moral values are great, for the whole world has fixed its eyes upon this corner of the earth and made the possession of the heap of ashes in the valley beneath the hills the test of victory and defeat.

And on April 9 Germany tries her last general attack, her last effort to crush and crunch through in true Prussian fashion, the fashion which the world saw first in the terrible slaughter about the Yser and at Ypres, where a quarter of a million Germans were killed and wounded in less than four weeks. This time the failure is absolute. There is no gain. Everywhere the French lines hold and the Battle of Verdun is over. The new phase is to be a siege, a slow grinding, pounding attack after long artillery preparation, and advance by inches and feet at the cost of great casualties.

In the Last Ditch

To the world Germany announces the new phase in a different phrase. The hope of immediate victory is over, and instead Berlin tells the world that had read the forecasts of the fall of the city on February 26 that everything is going as the German General Staff had planned, and that the city will fall in due course, precisely as the German General Staff had foreseen, on August 1.

Coincident with this there grows up and spreads the legend that French man power is being exhausted in the bloody shambles, and that the German battering ram is no longer seeking—in fact, never sought—to break lines, is merely endeavoring to destroy the manhood of France and is doing it with steady precision. And in addition there is the ready explanation that as a result of French casualties no allied offensive in the West will be possible this year, or ever, perhaps.

After April 9 there are German advances. Trenches are lost, the crest of Dead Man's Hill is passed, Vaux is taken. June 25 sees the Germans at the ditch of Souville and Tavannes, the inner forts, the village of Fleury, the farm and work of Thiaumont, the Battery of Damloup are in German hands. The French are actually in their last ditch, but it has taken four months to advance a mile on a front of three. The last German report of progress is on June 25, and already the French confidence is displayed in new vigor at the moment when Verdun seems most in danger.

We know the reason. Suddenly far off at the Somme the French and British armies attack. And in this attack the French advance cuts through German trenches, cuts a swath deeper than the Germans have cut in four months at Verdun, cuts it in as many days and occupies the hills facing Péronne across the Somme. Here, then, is the French answer to the German claim that France was being bled white. Foch at the Somme takes on the work of Pétain at the Meuse; the siege of Verdun, which began April 9, is over by July 2; the campaign of Verdun, begun on February 21, has lasted five months.

The Whole Investment Gone

Why did the Germans persist after the first defeats, after April 9, when the last real hope of a shining success ended? Chiefly because they never lost hope of taking the ruins of Verdun, and the moral value of these ruins had become incalculable; not to continue was to confess defeat. To confess defeat was to sacrifice prestige at home and abroad. But even more important was the fact that the Germans had put their main mass of artillery in, it would take time to move it to a new place, they had put their liquid capital into a great speculation and they were compelled to put new money in to protect the old. In the end they lost the whole investment. In men Verdun cost them above 500,000 killed, wounded and captured. It cost the French 250,000, of whom 40,000 at the most were captured. In the first days the French losses in artillery and prisoners were very large. After the first days there was an end of this wastage. The German losses were great at all times, but they increased with each fresh attack, while the French diminished as they restored their lines and moved up their heavy artillery.

German Losses

Measured by distance covered, the Allied advance at the Somme has already exceeded that of the Germans at Verdun. Together the Allies have taken twice as many prisoners and twice as many cannon. They are still gaining. German estimates of their losses place them above the Allied estimate of French losses at Verdun, but British and French estimates put German losses in the Somme battle above those of the French at the Meuse. We can only estimate the value of the Somme when we know the casualty lists, but measured by ground captured it is a greater gain than Germany made at Verdun.

But the measure of Verdun is not alone in the casualty list and the Allied offensive on the Somme. Because Germany decided to go west, Russia won her great Galician victories, captured 400,000 German and Austrian prisoners and 10,000 square miles of territory, while Italy got Gorizia. Finally Rumania came in and took off Russia's hands the great German army then preparing for an attack upon Russia. Germany was compelled to use this army against a new foe; she has used it effectively, but she might have used it with equal effect against the old foes if Verdun had not occurred.

The Final Chapter

And now we see the final chapter at Verdun. On October 21, exactly eight months to the day after the first German drive, the French leave their trenches after having repaid the Germans for their great bombardment, retake Douaumont fort and village, Thiaumont farm and work, Damloup battery, the famous forests of La Collette, Chenois, Fumin, the quarries of Haudromont, inclose Vaux on three sides and, save for Vaux, retake all the ground inside the old intrenched camp of Verdun which Germany has taken in her months of advance. Germany is now back of the position she held on February 25, save at Vaux, and the fate of Vaux is sealed.

This venture cost the French in total casualties less than 4,000 men; they took more than 5,000 German prisoners. All told the fighting lasted three hours; the advance from Douaumont to Fleury, two short miles, had taken the Germans exactly four months.

They Have Not Passed

What is the secret of the French success? Mainly it is to be found in the fact that German artillery has been removed from before Verdun to meet the Allies' thrust in the Battle of the Somme. Thither troops have also gone, all the advantages the Germans possessed in February the French had in October; the one advantage they always had, their unconquerable spirit, they never lost and the Germans never acquired.

On April 6, three days before the last general attack of the Germans, I saw a French division filing through Verdun on its way to the firing line. I saw the men as they moved through the shell-cursed town. I sat and watched the lines flow by, marching to the sound of the guns. And having seen the men, I came away convinced that Verdun would not fall and the Kaiser's army would not pass. And it is the faces of these men that rise before me now, when their victory is established, when Verdun has become as memorable a French victory over the Prussian as Valmy and not less significant for mankind.